

**Reflection at St Margaret's Uniting Church,
Mooroolbark, Victoria – 12th November, 2017
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Précis Notes on the message

These notes are in précis form rather than verbatim, prepared in advance as 'notes for preaching'. Preaching is peculiar speech, a dynamic form of communication that needs to be open to the leading of God's Spirit, faithful to the Biblical text, and mindful of the hearer's attention.

"I have seen the Lord": an important contrast between Isaiah's recount and the disciples in the days after the resurrection. God in human form, but God incarnate; God in total otherness, in a heavenly realm that we can barely comprehend, and is simultaneously frightening and awe-inspiring. Angels announce their presence with "do not be afraid", what, then, is Christ like in all His glory?

Judah had a long sequence of kings who started out good and noble, and then departed from God's ways, and Uzziah was one of them. "The year when king Uzziah died" looks to the water-shed moment. Maybe this will give the kingdom the chance of a fresh start. To find their place as God's people again; maybe this time the cycle of good king going bad will end. Into that national conversation comes Isaiah's experience: a scene that it is totally foreign to us, and in a sense we are not welcome there, because in comparison, we are impure. There is a genuine and total "ontological difference" between God and us. If we are going to come into the presence, it is going to take action from this other realm – the live coal and the refiner's purifying – for us to be welcome. We enter an experience of otherness; an experience of sensing, by comparison, our own imperfection. Of that encounter we, too, could truly say "I have seen the Lord".

At this time of year, the lectionary has a sequence of readings which point to the end times, including the parable of the 10 virgins. A quick recap of this chapter of Matthew: those who had enough oil, and those who didn't; those who were wise stewards, and those who weren't; and the sheep and the goats. They're parables, stories to communicate a central truth. Maybe our starting point when reading these is a sense of dread, or fear or terror; but what if we came upon these with a sense of joy? That there will come a time when the world we know and the world we can only glimpse will coincide. In all this, there is the lead-up to Christmas when God's domain and our domain coincide(d), as God incarnate, the baby Jesus. And the promise is that this intersection will come again in even richer, more full – unimaginably richer, more full – way. Amongst this joyous 'approach' to these parables, what might be the central truth of the parable of the 10 virgins? The moment will be unexpected – after all, who would have expected a baby in a manger, or a Jewish teacher on cross? Not everyone at this wedding was a bridesmaid with a lamp, but (at this risk of singling some out), some of the bridesmaids are onto the task, and some of them aren't. So while we watch and wait, whatever you contribute to the complex mosaic that God's kingdom is – do it well, and do it properly.

Just like the Israelite kings and the life of Uzziah, the story of early the Israelites can be seen as repeated cycles of (1) following God carefully (2) doing the wrong thing (3) coming to see the error of their ways (4) repenting and (5) receiving God's forgiveness and a renewal of that relationship. This is recounted in the reading from Joshua. The people have strayed from God's way, and Joshua is not convinced that the Lord will have them back. But they announce, "We will serve the Lord". The foolish bridesmaids, and probably us, could take a leaf out of their book.

Stand back for a moment and catch a glimpse of what is coming. Stand with Isaiah and see the Lord in magnificence and otherliness. In a place where we are hardly welcome because of our impoverishedness; out of this place the new light is streaming; the darkness is vanished; eternal morning shall rise; shadows will end. Somehow God calls/enlists us. "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us". And, strangely ennobled, oddly spontaneous, and surprisingly like the ancient Israelites and then the disciples at Pentecost, we hear ourselves saying "Here I am, send me".

Sent out to make our contribution to the complex mosaic that is God's kingdom, now. Sent out to be full contributors, not to make a half-baked effort, or to be a pretender. Sent out to the people who cry; who are in pain; who are poor; who are in ill-health ...The need is great, and God enlists us, despite our limitations. Send me, Jesus; Lead me, Jesus; Fill me Jesus.